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RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0343  
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA 0495  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000812

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [KPAO](#) [MR](#)  
SUBJECT: BROAD AGREEMENT -- REFERENDUM "FREE AND  
FAIR"...AND FAR FROM PERFECT

REF: A. NOUAKCHOTT 784  
[1](#)B. NOUAKCHOTT 791

Classified By: Amb. Joseph LeBaron, Reasons 1.4(b)(d)

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(C) Key Points  
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-- Local UN, EU, Western Embassy and National Democratic Institute (NDI) representatives have agreed that while there were several procedural lapses, the elections were well organized and free from fraud.

-- The UN Election Assessment Team told Ambassador they were "satisfied with the referendum process and would recommend that the UN continue its engagement in the transition towards future elections."

-- In explaining the extraordinary election results, EU Assessment Team reps said "this was a no choice referendum...designed to limit the powers of the president and continue the process of change...there wasn't really anything to vote against," adding that "usually in Africa a referendum such as this is designed to enhance the power of the presidency, not diminish it."

-- Partners' recommendations for the coming elections included:

-- Reopening of the voter lists before November's municipal and legislative elections to allow additional Mauritians to register;

-- Enhancing the role of civil society in the electoral process, including in future election observations, to ensure their "buy-in" to the process;

-- Improving the legal framework for resolving electoral disputes and educating political parties and civil society on these procedures;

-- Providing more intensive training of poll workers and issuing clearer orders to security forces at polling sites; and

-- Ensuring the neutrality of the government in the coming political campaigns.

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(C) Comments  
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-- Ambassador intends to give junta-leader Fal and the Transitional Government a couple of weeks to bask in the domestic and international praise they are receiving for a successful referendum.

-- After that, he will seek an appointment with Fal to lay out clearly what we think must be fixed in order to have free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections. Much more will be at stake in those elections, and the political parties and the mass public will be much less forgiving of "procedural lapses" in those elections. Fal, the Military Council, and the Transitional Government need to plan for that.

-- As for the referendum, Embassy believes it was free from fraud and that it gave voters a truly democratic opportunity. The Europeans, the AU, the Arab League, and others in the international community have arrived at the same conclusion.

-- As important as the international reaction, the Mauritians themselves have readily accepted the results, with virtually every public figure praising both the process and the vote.

-- We believe the extraordinary 97% yes vote can be attributable to several factors: the lack of an organized "no" campaign, the strong government-led "yes" campaign, and ultimately, the very nature of the referendum itself, which presented little reason to vote no -- except, perhaps, to

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protest the very transition process itself. But that process has received widespread public support from its beginning.

End Key Points and Comments.

¶1. (C) Embassy staff, including the Ambassador, DCM and PolOff, have met repeatedly with representatives from the UN, EU, Western Embassies and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to exchange views on last Sunday's referendum vote. All partners agree that while there were several procedural lapses, the elections were well organized and free from fraud.

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THE EUROPEAN UNION  
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¶2. (C) Ambassador met with the EU Assessment Team on June 28 to discuss the EU's referendum findings. While noting she was speaking personally, EU contractor Raphaëlle Mathey explained that the "referendum logistics were very good and the Ministry of Interior (which ran the elections) was well organized and strong." She added that "there were lots of little procedural problems, but no big ones," though she cautioned that "these little problems must be resolved before the more difficult November municipal elections, in order for those elections to be similarly successful."

¶3. (C) In response to Ambassador's question of how support for the referendum could have been so high, Mathey said "this was a no choice referendum." "The referendum was designed to limit the powers of the president and continue the process of change," she explained, adding that "there wasn't really anything to vote against." EU contractor Vincent De Herdt added that "usually in Africa a referendum such as this is designed to enhance the power of the presidency, not diminish it."

¶4. (C) Mathey compared this election to the referendum in Tajikistan in 1999. "In '99 we had the country coming together after years of civil war," Mathey said, explaining that "the vote was the only way to get out of the mess of

war, and we saw turnout around 97% and support at 84%." "It was the only way forward, and that is exactly what we have here...it was a plebiscite for change."

¶15. (C) Mathey also added that the strong government-led campaign certainly influenced the turnout and levels of support. "When you have the prime minister publicly saying that to vote yes is to be patriotic, that sets the political environment and 97% support isn't much of a surprise," Mathey said.

¶16. (C) The team's report will provide several recommendations for the coming elections, including making unused ballots an accountable item, improving the legal framework for resolving electoral disputes and educating political parties and civil society on these procedures, publishing the electoral results for each polling station so observers' findings can be confirmed against the official figures, and ensuring the neutrality of the government.

¶17. (U) Later that afternoon, the Austrians in their capacity as the current president of the EU issued a declaration on the referendum stating that "the European Union welcomes the proper conduct and results of the referendum," which "marks an important step towards democracy and towards parliamentary and municipal elections in November 2006 and presidential elections in 2007." The statement goes on to praise the organization and supervision of the referendum, "despite some shortcomings recorded by the observer missions."

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UNITED NATIONS  
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¶18. (C) The UN Election Assessment Team on June 29 provided Ambassador an out-brief of their ten day assessment mission to Mauritania. Chief of the delegation Valerie De Campos Vello said their team was "satisfied with the referendum process and would recommend that the UN continue its engagement in the transition towards future elections." De Campos said "we all agree the process was successful...and

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the referendum was transparent," adding "especially when you consider that this was the first time they used a single ballot."

¶19. (C) The referendum problems listed by the team included the presence of the military inside the polling stations, the government's decision not to allow civil society to observe the elections, and inconsistent ballot tabulating procedures.

¶10. (C) The team said the two most needed changes were the reopening of the voter lists before the November elections (to allow additional Mauritanians to vote), and the inclusion of civil society in the electoral process, including in future election observations (to ensure the "buy-in" of civil society). The team said the Inter-Ministerial Committee on the Democratic Processes (which includes the Secretary General of the Presidency and the Ministers of Justice, Interior, and Foreign Affairs) responded "coldly" to both recommendations, citing the problems with reopening the voter lists during Mauritania's holiday and harvest season, and the trouble of having civil society members observing the elections who had not received proper training. De Campos said "the committee didn't say no, but they were very negative."

¶11. (C) The team did receive positive feedback from the committee on the status of legislation for public financing of political parties and the 20% quota for female political participation. According to the UN team, the Council of Ministers will take up these two issues at their next weekly meeting scheduled for July 5.

¶12. (C) The UN team will report their findings to the UN Under Secretary for Political Affairs. The Under Secretary is expected to send a letter to the Transitional Government confirming continued UN cooperation, and encouraging the Mauritians to continue to work with the UN Electoral Assistance Team in strengthening the electoral process.

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ADDITIONAL PERSPECTIVES  
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¶13. (C) NDI's Senior Program Officer Gregory Houel told PolOff that their observation missions "revealed the same successes and shortcomings as the other missions," adding that "we noted many small problems, but nothing that would keep us from considering these elections free and fair." "The two biggest problems we witnessed were the involvement of the military in the process and the role of the electoral commission representatives, which instead of overseeing the process and intervening when necessary, were indistinguishable from the other poll workers." Houel also emphasized the need for political party and civil society representatives to observe the municipal, legislative and presidential elections, saying "NDI will focus on observer training for these groups over the coming months."

¶14. (C) Other organizations which had observation missions included the African Union, the Arab League, and the International Francophone Organization (OIF). All three reached similar conclusions, describing the referendum as "free," "democratic," "effective," and "transparent." LeBaron